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ABSTRACT

Interest in the quality of after-school programs has been increasing. It is recognized that, in urban and low-income areas, after-school programs are essential to counteract the effects of a number of factors contributing to a student's lack of opportunities and ability to succeed academically. However, information on the types of programs that work best with urban youth has been limited. This digest, updating two 1996 Clearinghouse publications on urban after-school programs, offers a distillation of the findings of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR), located at Johns Hopkins University and Howard University. To gather information on successful programs, CRESPAR conducted a survey of 34 programs, which could be divided into five general categories. These included language arts, study skills, academic subject programs, tutorial programs, and community-created or community-based programs. Relatively few evaluations of these programs have been conducted, and the studies that have been done have had methodological problems. CRESPAR has identified some solutions to these methodological problems and has determined that many programs are effective as after-school programs, while others that are effective as in-school programs can be adapted easily for use after school. Despite the lack of rigorous evaluations of after-school programs, it is still possible to identify components common to most effective urban programs. Programs what address the academic, recreational, and cultural needs of the student are best. Characteristics of well-designed programs include (1) well-trained staff and volunteers; (2) a solid structure; (3) assessment and program evaluation; (4) inclusion of families in program planning; and (5) an advisory board to help maintain links among the community, families, religious organizations, and the school system. (Contains six references.) (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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URBAN AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS: EVALUATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interest in the quality of after-school programs has been increasing. A growing number of parents recognize that their children need a safe place to spend non-school time and an organized program for both reinforcing the school curriculum and cultivating strengths not developed in school. In urban and low income areas, after-school programs are essential to counteract the effects of a range of factors that can contribute to youth's lack of opportunities and ability to succeed academically (Posner & Vandell, 1994). Thus, President Bill Clinton has proposed significantly increasing funding for urban programs, and Congress and some local governments have also advocated and funded after-school activities.

To date, research to determine which types of programs work best with urban youth has been limited, in part due to a historical disinclination to spend time and money on evaluations (Flaxman & Orr, 1996; Flannery, 1998) and in part due to difficulties specific to investigations of after-school programs. Recently, however, the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR), at Johns Hopkins University and Howard University, conducted a survey of 34 programs currently in use after school or in use during school but with the potential for use after school. CRESPAR's *Review of Extended-Day and After-School Programs and Their Effectiveness* (Olatokunbo S. Fashola, October 1998) describes specific programs (and provides contact information), common program types, and curricular and instructional strategies that seem to be effective. This digest, updating two 1996 Clearinghouse publications on urban after-school programs, offers a distillation of CRESPAR's findings.

Types of Programs

Many local after-school programs are modeled on national programs, using their resources and, frequently, their technical assistance. Other programs are local or even one-site operations; they may draw on national models, develop their design independently, or work with local schools to help mesh the educational services of both school and after-school programs. Programs fall into five general categories:

Language Arts. These programs, focusing on a single component of the curriculum, address the need to increase urban students' literacy and language skills. One specific program goal is to increase reading by youth, possibly as an alternative to watching television. A parent component of some programs encourages families to read and visit the library together, and parents to help with their children's homework.

Study Skills. These programs, which may address all areas of the curriculum, are specifically designed for at-risk students whose lack of study and comprehension skills hampers their academic achievement. Specially-trained teachers provide students with strategies for successfully organizing and retaining information taught in the classroom and for preparing for tests.

Academic Subjects. These programs address a specific curriculum area such as science or computer technology. Many programs in this category are extended-day programs; that is, they operate in the early morning and during school vacations as well as after school. Some were developed as enrichment programs by for-profit organizations.

Tutoring. These programs help students improve their reading. They differ from language arts programs in that they are comprised solely of one-on-one tutoring activities.

Community-Created or Community-Based. These programs are often developed within the community to meet local needs, although some are local branches of national multi-focus programs, such as scouting. They are more likely than other programs to emphasize recreational, social, or cultural activities, although they may be housed in schools.

Program Evaluation History and Methods

Specific outcomes of after-school programs for urban students and youth of color are difficult to ascertain. Not only have few evaluations been conducted, but those that exist are based on middle-income white youth and thus may not be relevant for low-income populations. Most evaluations also suffer from selection bias because families that volunteer for after-school programs may be different enough from those that do not to affect the impact of the program. A lack of controls also plagues most evaluations because of the difficulty in finding a comparable non-participating group of youth to track. Finally, correlating a youth's program participation with improvements in academic achievement is hampered by a lack of coordination between the academic programs of the school and the after-school program. Also, since not all students attending a single after-school program attend the same school, the program cannot develop its curriculum to reinforce or supplement that of a specific school.

CRESPAR has identified several solutions to these methodological problems. They involve use of control groups comprised of youth randomly placed on a waiting list when they sought to enroll in a program; youth on a waiting list because they signed up too late to be enrolled immediately; or youth who attend the same school as program participants, had the opportunity to sign up for the program, but did not. These controls can be employed in future studies to produce more dependable results.

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However flawed the studies determining their viability, most of the programs described in the CRESPAR review have been shown to be effective in an after-school setting or effective as an in-school program and easily replicable for use after school.

Evaluation Findings

Despite the paucity of rigorous evaluations of after-school programs, it is still possible to identify components common to the most effective urban programs and to make recommendations for implementing them.

Effective Program Components

Programs that address the following three development needs of the "whole" child (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) are best:

Academic. Optimally, to improve the school performance of children, the curriculum of after-school programs should be aligned with that of the school by using regular school-day teachers as program staff. If this is not possible, the program should employ qualified instructors who provide homework assistance and organize activities promoting basic skills mastery, and who are familiar with and can be held accountable for student outcomes. One-on-one tutoring projects are particularly effective.

Recreational. After-school programs may provide the only way urban youth can engage in recreational activities, given the unsafe conditions of many parks, budget cuts that curtail school and community sports programs, and the lack of local adults available to coach teams or serve as advisors to clubs. The recreational component of an after-school program can provide children with opportunities to develop whatever skills they choose, while also helping them learn good sportsmanship, coping strategies, and problem solving.

Cultural. Like recreational activities, a program's cultural component helps youth develop important skills not addressed by the school curriculum, and can help develop participants' self-esteem. Cultural activities include hobbies, such as woodworking, fishing, sewing, and playing a musical instrument. They can also provide lessons in etiquette, interviewing skills, dressing for success, and conflict resolution.

Effective Program Development and Management

The implementation of the above-described components of a successful after-school program requires thoughtful development and strong management. Characteristics of well-designed programs include the following:

Well-Trained Staff and Volunteers. First, programs must recruit well qualified and caring staff and volunteers, including parents who can benefit from participation in family projects. Training should include how to work well with different types of children of different ages, in addition to how to implement specific program components. Ongoing contact with staff should include group and individual meetings, opportunities to solve problems, and evaluation.

A Solid Structure. Programs need clear goals, well-developed procedures and resources for attaining them, and extensive staff development, especially those with an academic focus (Fashola & Slavin, 1997). Programs that do not use prepackaged academic programs have to allow adequate time for curriculum and program development and training. Many effective programs have a strong link with the school curriculum.

Assessment. Evaluation of a program's effectiveness requires an initial statement of its goals: academic, recreational, social, etc. An assessment can then indicate specific changes in the participants, such as increased reading scores and higher self-esteem; or improved attitudes and behavior (i.e., lack of involvement with drugs and violence). The most valuable assessments compare the gains of program participants with a control group of similar non-participants.

Inclusion of Families in Program Planning. This is especially important for programs offering cultural and recreational activities for children and their parents, since families of participants are more likely to stay involved if they help design projects.

An Advisory Board. An external board helps maintain links between the community, families, religious organizations, and the school system. It also creates a group of stakeholders who make policy decisions about the program and are responsible for its smooth operation.

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The ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education issued two related publications in 1996, both by Wendy Schwartz: a digest, *After-School Programs for Urban Youth* (ERIC Digest No. 114, ED 402 370); and a parent guide, *A Guide to Choosing an After-School Program* (ED 407 448).

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